

FORD HARRISON!

THE NEW ERROL FLYNN? OR THE NEW CLARK GABLE? OR THE NEW HUMPHREY BOGART?

**David Stratton
examines the
stop-start
moviedom
adventures of
the screen's
top adventure
hero**

The video release of one of the most entertaining movies ever made, *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, coupled with the smash cinema success of *Return Of The Jedi*, has turned the spotlight on the star of them both, Harrison Ford.

It might be said, with some accuracy, that stars are the least important elements of these films (and the two others in the *Star Wars* cycle): that special effects and elaborately-staged action sequences are what has made them so popular. True enough, but the enjoyably off-hand performances from Ford at the centre of these films has added a lot to their enjoyment. And, as he's demonstrated from his gutsy performance in the altogether grittier *Blade Runner*, he's not destined to be just a comic strip hero.

Harrison Ford was born in Chicago in 1942 and became interested in acting when he appeared in a college production of *The Skin Of Our Teeth* at Ripon, a private school in Wisconsin (he was expelled in his final year for reasons unspecified). He went to Los Angeles and was accepted by Columbia Pictures which, at this time (the early '60s), was contracting young actors for a short-lived New Talent program.

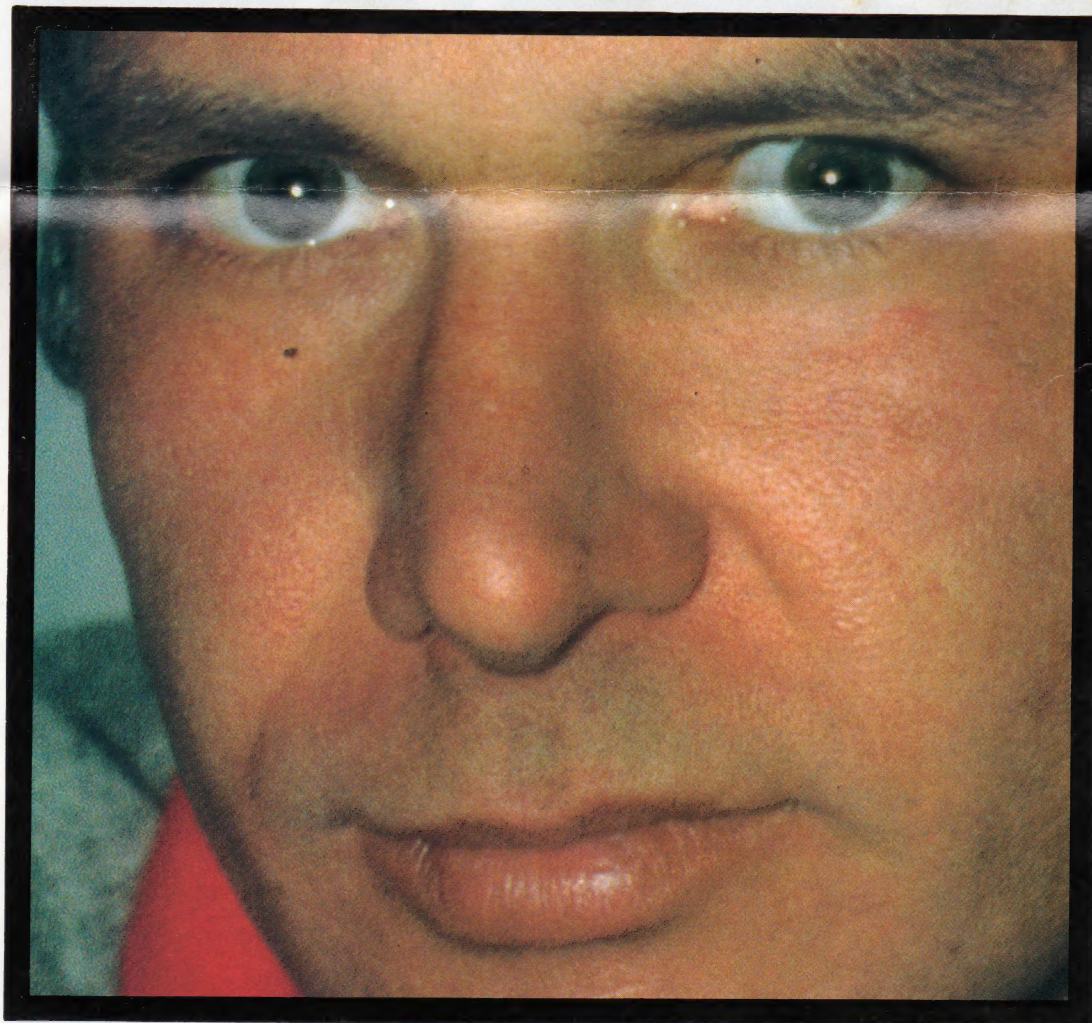
He made his screen debut in a crime movie *Dead Heat On A Merry-Go-Round* made in 1966 by director Bernard Girard. The stars were James Coburn, Camilla Sparv and Aldo Ray, and Ford played a hotel bellhop. Columbia executives weren't impressed; Ford was told he'd never make a star. However, his \$150-per-week salary continued, a salary he needed to support his

young wife (he'd married after meeting her at college where they were fellow students) and two children.

He hated the fact that Columbia insisted on a very strict control of the lives of its young contract players: the studio told him what kind of haircut he should have, and even suggested studio starlets to accompany him on dates around town.

He persevered, however, and made other films at Columbia in which he appeared in similarly insignificant roles, for instance the wretched comedy *Luv* (1967), one of Jack Lemmon's weakest films, and *The Long Ride Home* (1967), a western. The same year, Columbia loaned him to Universal where he was given a much bigger role as a young Texan anxious to enlist in the Civil War in *Journey To Shiloh*, which starred James Caan.

Ford thought there were more acting possibilities in the more flexible Universal environment and asked to be released from his Columbia contract. The studio



HARRISON FORD . . . turned his back on the studio system to find stardom in 'Star Wars'.



FORD in 'Raiders Of The Lost Ark' . . . he devised the movie's best joke.

agreed, and he immediately signed a similar contract with Universal, which ultimately proved just as unrewarding. There he appeared mostly in TV series, such as *Ironside*, *Gunsmoke*, *The FBI* and *The Virginian*. Ironically, Columbia then requested him back for a role as a student in *Getting Straight*, a popular comedy with Elliott Gould in the lead.

By this time, however, Ford was tired of acting and tired of studio contracts. He decided to give it all away, and became, of all things, a carpenter. This came about because he bought a house near the Hollywood Bowl and decided to save money by renovating it himself. He knew nothing about carpentry, so bought books on the subject, and the results were so successful that for a few years he made a living making furniture, cabinets, remodelling — any job he was offered. "I could see my accomplishments," he said later. "And it was better than being described as an out-of-work actor."

He returned to movies sporadically — and only when he was offered something he really wanted to do. The first such offer, after a two-year absence, was from casting director Fred Roos who was looking for new faces for a movie called *American Graffiti*. The producer was Francis Ford Coppola; the director was a young man called George Lucas. Ford was given the

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role of Bob Falga, a wild hot-rod. It wasn't a large part, but it was a good one. Two years later, Roos called Ford (back at his carpentering) again and offered him a role in another Francis Coppola production, *The Conversation*, which Coppola was directing himself. Ford played a young homosexual in this superlative study of American paranoia (a great movie which should be on the "most wanted on video" list). During this period of relative inactivity, Ford also played a key role in an important telemovie, *The Court Martial Of Lieutenant Calley*.

Ford's career was transformed when his *American Graffiti* director George Lucas asked him to read for the part of Han Solo in his projected film *Star Wars*. Lucas, like Coppola and others in the new generation of Hollywood directors, was an avowed movie-buff: he wanted his space fantasy to embody tributes to the swashbuckle films of Hollywood's past not to mention all those World War 2 Air Force epics. Ford brought a physicality and an old-fashioned buccaneering quality to the role of the intrepid Solo, exactly the qualities Lucas was seeking. In a way, Ford plays the sort of role which, 40 years earlier would have been taken by Clark Gable or Errol Flynn.

The phenomenal success of *Star Wars*, released in 1977, re-established Harrison Ford's acting career and made him greatly in demand. He agreed to play Han Solo in the projected sequels Lucas was planning, and the same year went to the

Philippines to play a bit role in Coppola's Vietnam epic *Apocalypse Now* (the much-delayed production wasn't released until 1979). He also played a small but impressive part in Jeremy Paul Kagan's *Heroes*, an off-beat dramatic comedy made as a vehicle for TV star Henry Winkler; Ford showed real acting ability as an emotionally-shattered Vietnam veteran.

However, his subsequent decisions were, as it turned out, less than sound. His first starring role after *Star Wars* was in *Force Ten From Navarone* (1978) in which he appeared with Robert Shaw. This was a belated and clumsy sequel to the very popular war movie of the '50s, *The Guns Of Navarone*, but under Guy Hamilton's leaden direction proved to be too little too late. Ford played an American Ranger sent to link up with survivors of the original Navarone mission and locate a Nazi spy; it was a routine performance in a depressingly dull film.

There was worse to come. *Hanover Street* (1979) was an incredibly dated and unconvincing return to *Brief Encounter* territory, set in a wartime London of cardboard phoniness and involving Ford as a U.S. fighter pilot involved in a dreary love affair with a married woman (Lesley-Anne Down). And for his third bomb in a row, Ford accepted a role in *The Frisco Kid*, a western comedy by Robert Aldrich, a director whose action films have been excellent but whose grasp of comedy is rudimentary: Ford played an incompetent outlaw who teams up with out-of-place Rabbi Gene Wilder for some protracted and unamusing slapstick in the Old West. During 1979, Ford also made a brief, uncredited, guest appearance in the inventive (but

commercially unsuccessful) sequel *More American Graffiti*, playing former hot-rodder Bob Falga now a member of the establishment as a cruising cop.

It must have been with a sense of relief that Harrison Ford returned to the *Star Wars* saga — and the Han Solo character — in Irvin Kershner's exuberant sequel, *The Empire Strikes Back*. Solo was even more of a smart-ass in the second film, but once again the pyrotechnics and effects tended to overwhelm the human actors (the robots and puppet-like creatures remain favorites with the kids).

When George Lucas and Steven Spielberg started working on *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, their affectionate and breathtaking tribute to old Saturday afternoon serials, they had a very good idea of the actor they wanted to play the intrepid hero, Indiana Jones: Tom Selleck. But (fortunately, as it turned out) Selleck had just signed a contract to appear in the *Magnum* TV series, and at the last moment wasn't available. Though second choice for the movie, Ford makes it his best performance. This is genuine, vintage, star material, an improvement on Han Solo because Indiana Jones is more down-to-earth (literally), more resourceful, and much funnier.

Ford contributed some ideas to the character, including one of the movie's best jokes (and the one that usually has the audience applauding) when, confronted by a sabre-wielding Arab, he simply pulls his gun and shoots him. Ford told *Rolling Stone* magazine: "... I'd already done every damn useless thing in the world. I was into my fifth week of dysentery, and I was riding in at 5.30 a.m. with nothing to do but submit to wild imaginings. So I stormed Steven with the idea of just dismissing this maniac. I'd never unholstered my gun in the whole movie, so I said: 'Let's just shoot the —.' And we did."

With his battered trilby hat, his stockwhip and, above all, his raffish grin, Harrison Ford's Indiana Jones became one of the most enjoyable heroes of contemporary cinema.

His next film was another attempt at a change of pace. In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), Ford plays an LA cop of the future on a desperate search for escaped and dangerous "replicants" — robots who look and speak and even feel like human beings. As with the *Star Wars* films, the extraordinary visual effects of *Blade Runner* tended to dwarf the actors — though in a very different way, for this rain-lashed city of the future is as bleak as the space stations of the Lucas films are exhilarating. As the hero, Ford managed to suggest for the first time that he might one day assume the mantle of Humphrey Bogart as well as the mantles of Gable and Flynn.

Then came the third *Star Wars* movie, *The Return Of The Jedi*, very much the mixture as before except that finally Han Solo gets the girl. And, for most of 1983, Harrison Ford has been repeating his *Raiders Of The Last Ark* character in Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Death*, a movie we can all look forward to at the end of the year.

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HARRISON FORD FILMS ON VIDEO

- Star Wars* (1977) — CBS-Fox
- Apocalypse Now* (1978) — Rigby-CIC
- Force 10 From Navarone* (1978) — RCA-Columbia
- Hanover Street* (1979) — RCA-Columbia
- The Frisco Kid* (1979) — Warner
- Raiders Of The Last Ark* (1981) — Rigby-CIC
- Blade Runner* (1982) — Warner